

Red House Presbyterian Church

9/16/01

The Sunday after the World Trade Center Attack

Jonah 4; Luke 15:1-10

LAST TIME

The last time we gathered the sermon was on not just forgiving enemies but on blessing them. We heard that the anger of Jonah's prayer at the beginning of chapter 4 came from his awareness that God is indeed merciful, even to those whom the bitter prophet would see destroyed.

Reminded not only of Lord's Prayer where we pray "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," but also of God's love for the entire creation and God's desire for the perfection of the creation, a perfection of peace –reminded of these things, we heard of Jesus' more excellent way: not only are we to forgive our enemies but also to bless them.

Then, we imagined enemies and persecutors individually.

It is an indication of how things were that we would be more inclined to think of enemies individually – my enemy. My harasser, my rival.

It is a sign of how things have changed that many, perhaps most Americans, are now thinking of enemies, collectively, nationally. Our enemies.

Things have changed since that Sunday morning, but God's love for the creation, the words we say in the Lord's Prayer, and Jesus' command to bless even those who persecute us have not changed.

Unchanged, too, is the fact that many of us are not ready to forgive and to bless persecutors. Forgiving is difficult enough when we ourselves have been wronged, but it may be even harder to forgive when others have been hurt. On Wednesday night, one of us spoke movingly about his own struggle, recognizing the call to forgive, yet also speaking for many, I imagine, when he said that he was not sure he was at all ready for that.

A friend at school suggested that there is something wrong in forgiving right now – we don't even know how bad it is, so how can we truly forgive. Only God knows how many of His children are dead. How many will die today. How many will give up hope. Perhaps only God can really forgive.

Forgiveness is but one of the many things we are struggling with right now. On Wednesday evening, another person asked, what's justice? And are Christians called to root out evil and does that mean that we must prepare for war? We wonder, Why would someone do this to us? Our sense of innocence is lost.

And we can barely begin to struggle with these questions because we are still struggling with horrifying images that we can't help but see and terrifying thoughts that we dare not have.

Our opening hymn points the way, doesn't it? Our hope is built on God, Who came to us in Christ Jesus. If we are to begin the very long and difficult process of discerning God's will for us, we must begin by remembering Who our God is.

And once we've done this, then, when we pray later this morning and throughout the long and uncertain nights ahead, we will know to Whom we pray. We'll know better what to pray for – and we trust – what to listen for.

SEG: Who is this God, then?

NOW JONAH 4

In one sense Jonah gets it right.

Jonah – theology of repentance – knows that God will relent

God now teaches Jonah something deeper about Who God is.

pity for the vine

sorrow for a tree that is dying

sadness for a cat limping home from a nasty fight

love for the creation is in both us and God – made in image of God.

Yahweh – theology of compassion – as Christians we will hear I John: God has compassion because God is love.

Yahweh's question at the end is intended to teach Jonah and us to see the world differently, as God does, as a Creator Who loves all His creation. To see the world differently.

?SEG TO GROUND ZERO

Since Tuesday morning, we have seen the world differently.

Since Tuesday morning, the world we have seen has been centered on Ground Zero, the World Trade Center.

GROUND ZERO

Ground zero originally referred to the center of a nuclear explosion – the very center of the destruction, the ripping apart, the terror, and the horror.

Ground zero now refers to the base of the WTC, the ashes, the remains, the rubble, the terror, the concentration of the powers of evil in one place.

GROUND ZERO OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament has a Ground Zero, too, a center of violence, death, and the powers of evil. It is the Cross.

The Cross is Ground Zero for the New Testament because on the Cross God incarnate hung and bled and thirsted and cried out in the terror of abandonment and in so doing, God bore the full might of the powers and principalities and all the strength of evil and death. Matthew says that there was a darkness all across the land and that when Christ died on the Cross the earth itself shook and the rocks were split.

God's Son has already been at Ground Zero. And God is with His children at Ground Zero now.

LECTIONARY TEXT – LUKE 15:1-10

A friend at school described today's lectionary passage from Luke as providential. It contains God's Word that we need to hear this morning. What he saw in Jesus' two brief images of the shepherd looking for a sheep and a woman searching for a lost coin was a revelation of Who God is. Our God is a God Who relentlessly seeks, Who searches until the lost are found, Who strives to bring us all back together, Who wants to guide and care for all His sheep. A Shepherd Who will not be deterred by the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Who freely offers forgiveness and Who rejoices in repentance. We worship a God Who, as the psalmist says, seeks to lead us in paths of righteousness.

God searches for the lost, both those whose bodies cannot be found and those who are alive. Those who are alive but wandering, either straying from the fold, or wandering in and out of numbness, anger, sorrow, and pain.

That is simply Who God is.

The God Who would stay His hand even from the destruction of a wicked city out of His love for the creation, the God Who so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son is the same God Who relentlessly searches, gathers, and leads.

It is the same God of steadfast love Who guides us in our struggle.

Our Apostle's Creed tells us Who this God is and the depths of His searching.

This God, our God, sought out His crucified, dead, and buried Son even after the Son had descended into Hell.

SEG: Streams of mercy, never ceasing call for songs of loudest praise.